



17 July – 3 October 2010

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Nottingham Contemporary

Exhibition Guide



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Above: Installation view, 2007.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Logo by Evan Holloway



All images courtesy: cfa, Berlin; Maureen Paley, London and Gert & Uwe Tobias / Photography Alistair Overbrück.

Rather than have their work framed by the Uwe create a whole environment for their pictures and sculptures. They evoke a world of their own. This independent attitude is made to advertise the exhibition in their own imitable style - a strategy they have pursued in each of their exhibitions. By doing so they playfully alter the terms of engagement between art, audience and institution.

Exhibition Design

The woodcuts, paintings on paper, the ceramic sculptures on their elaborate stands and the typewriter drawings are united by the Tobias's exhibition designs. Rather than leaving exhibition spaces white and neutral, the brothers often paint sections of the walls in a single strong colour. The strong geometry of these blocks and lines of colour again relate to the graphic style of Constructivist art and the design of the Soviet revolutionary period. In the Nottingham Contemporary galleries the zigzag motif also suggests medieval heraldry and a different era altogether. As with the typewriter drawings, modernity and the dark ages are inconspicuously harmonised.

example, which connect the sculptural with an embroidery pattern," they have said.

Image left: *Untitled*, 2010. Typewriter on paper, 297 mm x 210 mm.

Another type of work the Tobias brothers return to repeatedly are drawings made with typewriters – an instrument once central to the modern work place, but consigned to history with the advent of the personal computer. The revolutionary typography and graphic design that the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky pioneered during the 1920s is a key influence here. Gert and Uwe again blend this with references to age-old handicrafts - embroidery in this instance – together with pagan or Caravaggesque imagery. El Lissitzky's designs are characterised by black and red type and geometric marks arranged dynamically – often at 45 degree angles - across the white page. In Rabalais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, argued that the medieval Carnival was a brief moment in time each year when the entire social order was turned on its head. This applied to its beliefs too. Riotous and grotesque imagery - and appetites celebrated in folk traditions - would replace the decorum of church and state for a few days. The jester or fool would take the place of the king or priest. Written in the 40s, but not published until the 60s, the book was also seen as a coded critique of Stalin's authoritarian regime.

Drawings

Introduction

Twin brothers Gert and Uwe Tobias were born in Brasov, in the Transylvanian region of Romania, in 1973. They lived there until the family moved to Germany in 1985. Returning to Romania as adults the brothers re-encountered the area's traditional folklore - its handicrafts, costumes and ceremonies – an influence that is clear in their work today.

The vampire myths centred on Transylvania are largely a western European invention, amplified by Hollywood. They were unknown to the Tobias brothers until they moved to Germany. In their earlier work they parodied the inevitable cultural association between the land they grew up in and the Dracula legend - a myth that Ceausescu's brutal dictatorship in Romania between 1965 and 1989 tragically echoed.

Obscure, ghoulish creatures, apparently dredged from ancient folk memory, populate their works, giving rise to grotesque humour. Both haunting and alluring, their works activate our visual memory and cultural associations. Every work remains Untitled, suggesting that the job of interpreting their enigmas belongs to us.

"Their work turns the visitor into an anthropologist stumbling on a compulsive culture whose codes can't quite be cracked," said Nottingham Contemporary's director Alex Farquharson. "Their masks, birdmen and skeletons remain cheerfully ghoulish enigmas."

The most distinctive and dominant feature of their exhibitions are large scale, vividly coloured and intricately realised woodcuts. They combine folk references with an aesthetic that relates to the early 20th century European avant-garde. In addition to the woodcuts, the exhibition features smaller

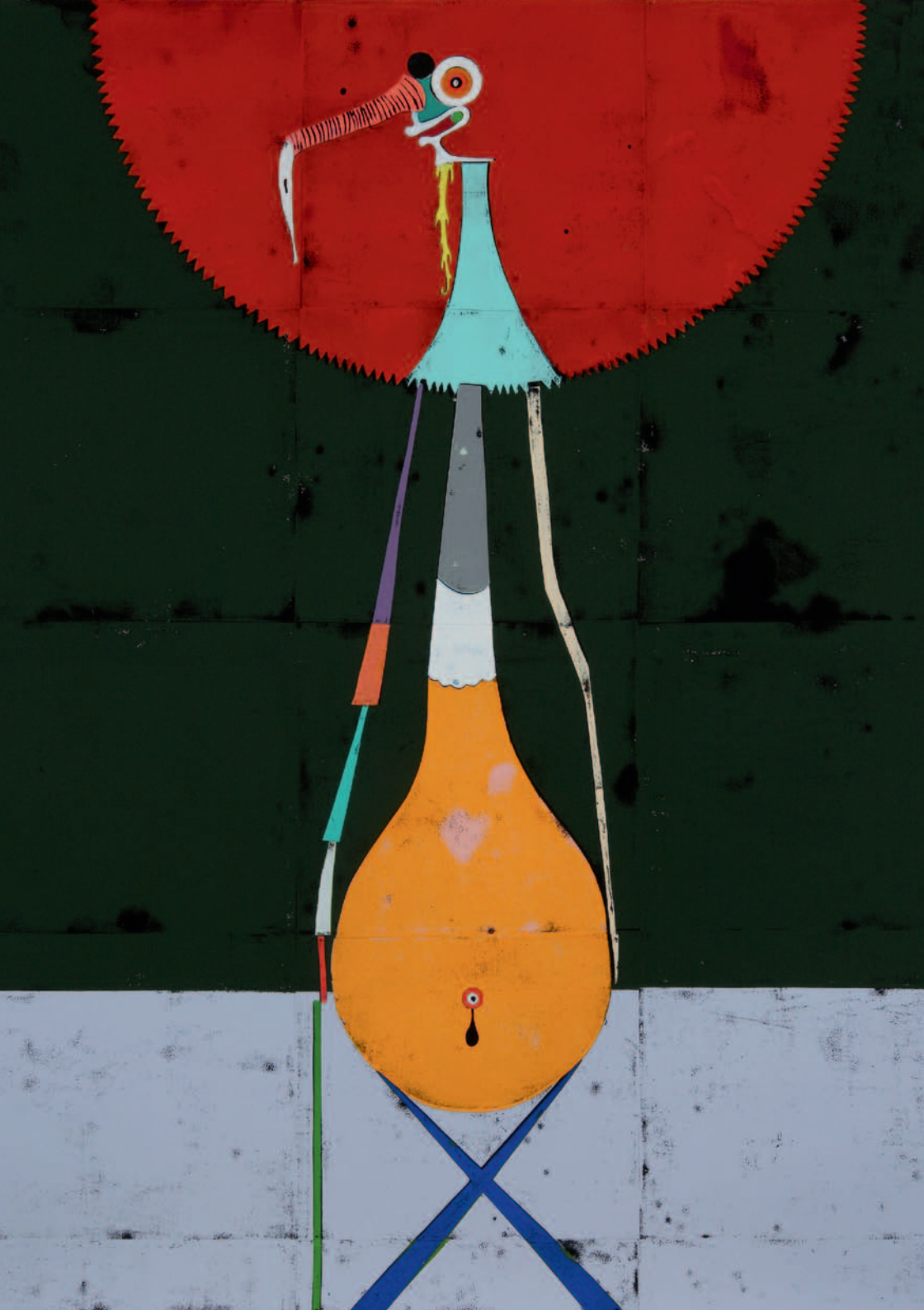
watercolour and gouache paintings on paper, drawings made with old-fashioned typewriters and handmade ceramic sculptures on coloured stands. Cabinets contain collages that allude to the Romanian tourist industry and popular culture.

The Tobias brothers work independently and together, in separate studios and a larger, shared studio. Each work is the result of collaboration. The woodcuts are signed off by both artists - drawings are passed back and forth for the critical response and creative input of the other, rather like a game of consequences. Colours are then mixed and tested in the shared studio before final decisions are made.

'There are no predefined fields of work; each of us does everything. After we have discussed our sketches, there is no individual authorship. That provides each of us with room to manoeuvre, and because we have a shared studio, we are constantly in dialogue with each other,' Gert and Uwe said.

Biography

Gert and Uwe Tobias have worked collaboratively since 2002. They live and work in Cologne, Germany. They have had numerous solo exhibitions in Germany, USA, Greece, Romania, Austria, Spain and Japan, including Kunsthalle Vienna (2009), La Conservera in Ceuti/Murcia, Spain (2009), Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn (2008), Projects 86, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007) and Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu, Romania (2007). This is their first solo UK exhibition.



Wood Cut Prints

The main elements of Gert and Uwe's exhibitions are woodcut prints, made from many sections of wood. They are the size of large paintings. The method is ancient, harking back to the folk arts of medieval Europe. Gothic and pagan imagery – owls and skulls, for example – which seems to belong to the same era, are arranged within geometric compositions which themselves recall early 20th century abstract art.

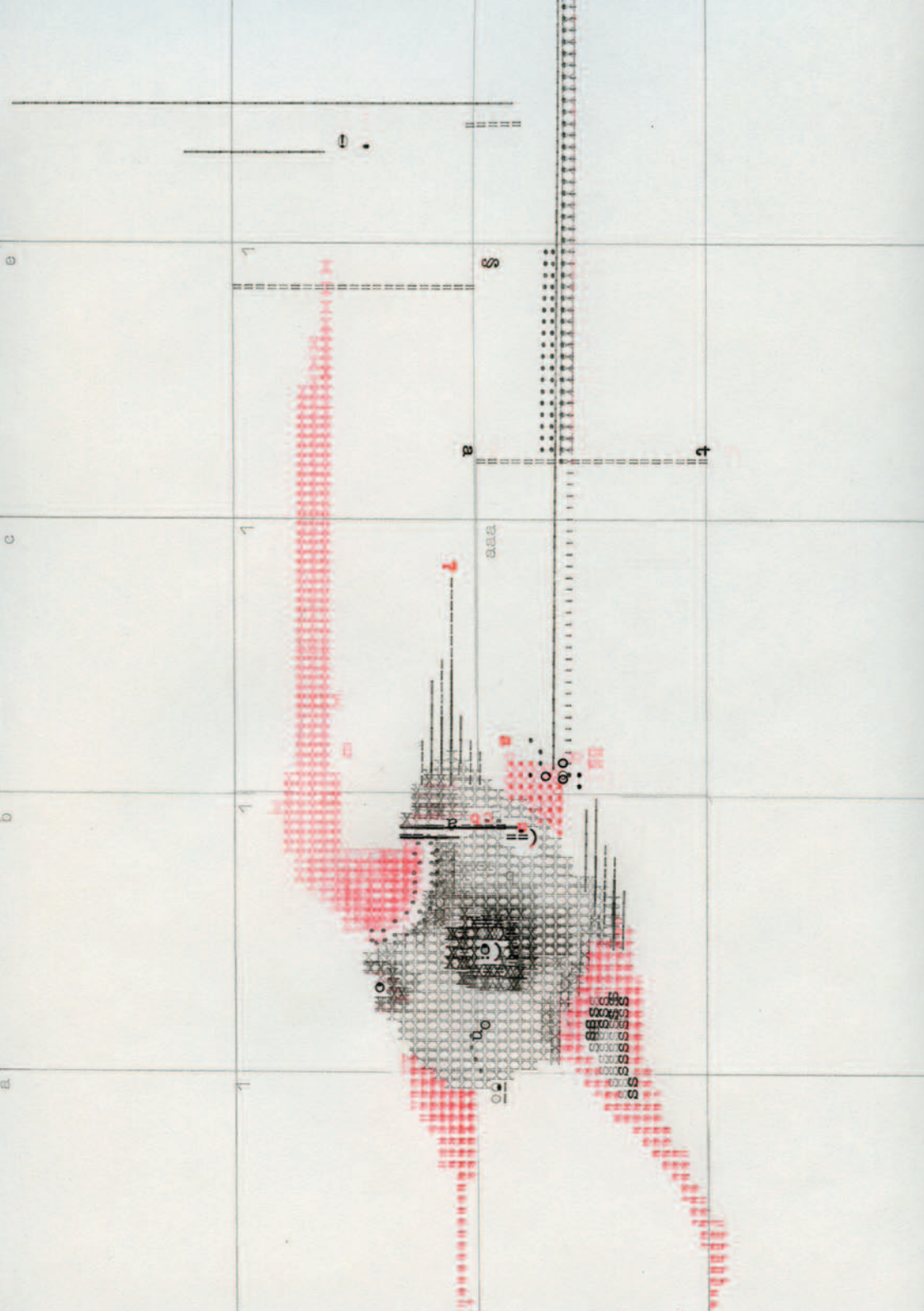
That abstract art belonged to the machine age - in our digital, postmodern age both abstract art and modernity appear antique. By blending abstract forms with ancient folk imagery,



pattern and techniques, the twins irreverently resituate Modernism in the Dark Ages, pointing to these paradoxes.

Although these works are prints, a medium intended for reproduction, they are usually made as unique works – again, like paintings. This is one of the many odd and humorous contradictions to be found in the twins' work.

"When producing a woodcut, often you decide spontaneously how the layers will be printed. Especially when printing over a surface a number of times, a new combination of colours can result," the Tobias brothers have said.



Sculpture

The Tobias's sculptures take the themes of their woodcuts and paintings into three dimensions. The small ceramic elements are rough and obviously handmade, like raw folk art. They resemble the soft, grotesque figures seen in their paintings on paper, and contrast with the colourful, geometric and sometimes unexpectedly elaborate pedestals on which they stand. In turn these often resemble the patterns found in their woodcuts.

They make collage works too, often in the form of books. Material from fashion magazines, travel brochures and other mass cultural sources are made into strange assemblages. In one image, a bird-headed man creeps around the onion domes of the orthodox churches of old Romania.



Above: *Untitled*, 2010, collage on paper, 297 mm x 210 mm

Right: *Untitled*, 2009, ceramics, 310 mm x 210 mm x 210 mm

Image right: *Untitled*, 2010, Coloured woodcut on paper, 2000mm x 1680mm.

Above left: *Untitled*, 2010, Coloured woodcut on paper, 2000 mm x 1680 mm

Above right: *Untitled*, 2010, mixed media on paper, 297mm x 210 mm x 210 mm

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Gert/Uwe
Tobias

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